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Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins

by
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Chapter 1: The Margins

Well into the novel *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether wonders what significance, if any, he has in Madame de Vionnet's and Chad Newsome's lives. Has he played nothing more than an adjunct role, rendering him important, as Madame de Vionnet says, only when "we want you"? What Strether faces is the terrifying fact of marginality; whereas he thought himself significant in the lives of his closest friends, he discovers that he is awkwardly other to their sexual intimacy.

Strether's predicament is far from unique in James's work, where many male characters find themselves displaced to the margins of society. An early exploration of this character type appears in *Roderick Hudson*. In this novel, Rowland Mallet, the person through whose eyes the reader views the events, fails to meet the masculine norm because he cannot muster sufficient heterosexual passion for Mary Garland. He is the type in James's work that one critic defines as the "artistic, middle-aged male" who is "unable to act aggressively or sexually" (Przybylowicz, *Desire and Repression*, 4), at least in the manner sanctioned by society. While it appears that he is romantically interested in Mary, this interest is discounted because of his lack of ardor, as he admires her more for her virtue than for her beauty. To him she appears as an anchor against the corrupting forces of Europe. She confesses her distaste for Europe, "If I were to remain here [in Europe], I should ... become permanently 'low'" (*Roderick Hudson*, 274). Rowland thinks of Mary as a preventative against the moral corruption of his friend Roderick Hudson: "Was it not in itself a guarantee against folly [for Roderick] to be engaged to Mary Garland?" (131).

Rowland's lack of passion for women contrasts with Roderick's ardor. Though Rowland says to Christina Light, "Hudson, as I understand him, does not need, as an artist, the stimulus of strong emotion, of passion" (231), secretly he admires Roderick for the very thing he condemns, a certain abandon to the moment, with intensity and without regret. Rowland admires

"the perfect exclusiveness" of Roderick, who never sees himself as part of the whole, only as "the clear-cut, sharp-edged, isolated individual, rejoicing or raging, as the case might be" (325). Rowland envies Roderick his passion, envies him enough in fact to make him desire Roderick in a way that he never desired Mary Garland.

Roderick detects Rowland's lack of passion for women. Late in the novel, he tells Rowland that "there are certain things"-women and what relates to women-"that you know nothing about." Roderick continues, "You have no imagination-no sensibility, nothing to be touched" (373). Rowland considers this "a serious charge"; yet despite his protest, it is undeniable that he fails to pursue women romantically.

On rare occasions Rowland acknowledges his unfortunate position, lamenting to his friend Cecilia early in the novel, "I want to care for something or for somebody. And I want to care with a certain ardor; even, if you can believe it, with a certain passion" (53). Of greater concern to him, however, is the way other people respond to him. Arguably his own lack of passion consigns him to questionable significance in the lives of his so-called friends, who are themselves romantically involved.

In an attempt at significance, Rowland assumes the posture of ambassador, a role that many of James's marginal males share. Rowland's ambassadorship begins, as it does for other ambassadors in James's novels, with a readiness to submit to the will of others; he is vulnerable to exploitation because he lacks an aggressive nature that would promote his own ends. Forced to follow the indirect route to power by means of an "ambassadorship," the marginal male only confirms his marginal status in his awkward attempt at social significance.

James carefully and sympathetically constructs a character who has been consigned early in life to marginal status, Rowland's childhood foretells marginality and raises the question of how much choice this character type has concerning his odd placement in society. As a boy, Rowland lacked the aggression associated with masculinity. His youthful demeanor is described as "passive" and "pliable" (56), and though he was a soldier in the Civil War, he suffered from the thought that his "duty was obscure," with the minor consolation that "on two or three occasions it had been performed with something of an ideal precision" (58). This tendency to disappear into vagueness from early on produces a character ripe for ambassadorship, ready to please.

Rowland agrees to accompany Roderick to Europe in the hope of enhancing the young man's artistic gifts. Mary Garland assigns him the task of watching over Roderick when she asks the older man to make Roderick "do his best" (91), and Rowland hopes to please Mary by pleasing Roderick. Ideally both his friends will recognize the great service he has done them.

Roderick initially accepts Rowland's services, but later he starts to question Rowland's motives, his discontent suggesting an awareness that Rowland expects more from the friendship than the younger man can give. Rowland expects a deep and abiding commitment, whereas Roderick sees the friendship

as relatively insignificant, responding simply with the phrase "You have been a great fool to believe in me" (190).

Mary too is incredulous at Rowland's willingness to help out-though she stands to benefit by Rowland's good will, however superficially, she advises Rowland, "You ought at any rate, to do something for yourself" (275). Rowland's shock at this statement demonstrates just how sincere he is about his role as ambassador to other's needs, and how baffled he will be to find out that he lacks any real significance in their lives. He responds, "For myself? I should have supposed that if ever a man seemed to live for himself-." His seeming humility masks his delight in having his generosity confirmed, he relishes the thought that "she has had that speech on her conscience" (275).

His ambassadorial role extends to Christina Light and her in-laws, who expose his vulnerability. Christina's mother tells him outright how momentarily useful but ultimately dispensable he is, explaining to him that the task before him is of the most urgent nature, yet in the same breath remarking that if he fails, "we have something else" (307). His disillusionment foreshadows the much greater psychic wounds that Mary and Roderick will inflict on him. Mary confesses, "If you were to tell me you intended to leave us to-morrow, I am afraid that I should not venture to ask you to stay" (357). Where Rowland once prided himself on a "certain intimacy" (116) with his friends, he now finds superficiality.

Roderick ultimately dismisses Rowland as insignificant in his life, in the hours before his death forcing Rowland to part company with him. Rowland pleads, "I should like to go with you," and Roderick replies, "I am fit only to be alone" (379). Assessing the situation later that day, Rowland considers that despite his "excellent cause," he had been "placed in the wrong" (380). Mary's comment on the situation rings true: "I am afraid your kindness has been a great charge upon you" (356).

Rowland Mallet exemplifies the theme of marginality as it relates to atypical masculine behavior. In James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Ralph Touchett similarly suffers from maladies that block his road to significance in the heterosexual realm. One common reading of the novel is that Ralph does not marry Isabel because he suffers from a lung disorder. Indeed Isabel says, "[Ralph] has a good excuse for his laziness" (*Portrait of a Lady*, 64). However, the problem is more complex than it at first appears. Touchett not only suffers from a physical disability; he also suffers from a lack of desire. Ralph's father, Daniel Touchett, assures his son that he could marry Isabel if he pursued her aggressively. Daniel stands firm on the side of marriage and society. saying to his son, "The best thing you can do, when I'm gone, will be to marry" (156). Ralph protests that he has a bad lung, and adds that it is better not to marry one's cousin., his father, however, maintains his position as guardian of the social norm. Daniel Touchett has the rhetorical advantage, socially sanctioned as the patriarchal voice. He judiciously advises his son not to linger in the margins of bachelorhood, saying with authority, "All you want is to lead a natural life" (157). In Daniel Touchett's view, Ralph's bachelor

life carries the taint of incompleteness, as if his son can't live a full life unless he marries. He tells Ralph that he lives on "false principles" (157). To silence his father, Ralph finally denies having any affection for Isabel.

Ralph has earlier admitted to Henrietta Stackpole that he could in fact marry if he chose to do so, "Shall you not believe me to be so on the day I tell you I desire to give up the practice of going round alone?" (85). The word "desire" implies that his object of desire might not be marriage. His failure to tie the heterosexual knot goes beyond physical disabilities and is sufficiently complex to mystify Isabel, who wonders, "What were his views]" (280). Ralph's dilemma raises important questions, for if he is limited not only by ill health, but also by a lack of "normal" passion, then he is emotionally as well as physically unfit for a society that sees as its ultimate goal a person's participation in the rites of marriage.

Unfortunately, Ralph's fondness for bachelorhood may be more costly than he imagines. His affinity for an alternative life relegates him to an ambassadorial role similar to that of Rowland Mallet. At the very moment when his father would have him share the abundant social blessings of marriage with Isabel, Ralph instead crusades for her financial well-being while he remains a bachelor. His payment for such behavior is high; he remains beyond the pale of significance in a heterosexual world.

The costs are apparent in the scene immediately following his encounter with his father on the subject of matrimony. At this point his "amusement" (159) in funding Isabel while never committing himself to marriage consigns him against his will to the status of observer. His lung disorder has worsened, confining him to the house, and instead of enjoying a walk outside with Isabel and her friend Madame Merle, he is forced to watch them from the window. James describes him as "almost a prisoner" (163). In another incident, in Italy, Ralph finds himself once again on the margins of Isabel's life. In what Ralph perceives as emblematic of his exclusion, Isabel withholds from him the details of her marriage. This emotional separation comes as a painful reminder that his disabilities—both physical *and* emotional—have placed Isabel beyond his reach. She is now engulfed in her marriage, with concerns to which a third party cannot be privy.

Ralph falls into the category of the marginalized male because his body *and* his mind fail to meet social expectations. Because he is terminally ill, his virility is in question. But more inciting than the involuntary condition of poor health is his utter lack of desire to marry. With a curiosity bordering on obsession, Daniel puzzles over his son's motives. Abstaining from romance as he does, Ralph's life seems frustratingly to involve and satisfy no one but himself; to a highly successful businessman like Daniel, Ralph's life is nothing but a game. In point of fact, his flaunting of convention masks the serious implications of life at the margins.

Significantly, James portrays his marginal males sympathetically. Something in their experience *compels* these characters to a life outside the norm, and it is in this lack of choice that they attract a large amount of reader sympathy. Further exploration of the sexually marginal male appears in *The*

Princess Casamassima, with Hyacinth Robinson as the character incapable of meeting the masculine norm. Besides his poverty and lack of proper education, his appearance connotes impotence. His legs are short, his complexion pale, his hands delicate, his voice high—all suggesting a male less than manly. Unlike his acquaintance Paul Muniment, who appears well-equipped to deal with the rigors placed upon him by society, the small-boned Hyacinth carries the stigma of illness. His deficiency is reinforced in everyday experience, such as his walking through London with the physically and emotionally able Muniment, who asks Hyacinth if he would like to be carried in case his weak limbs fail him (*Princess Casamassima*, 131).

James appears to have anticipated his audience's distaste for Hyacinth's unconventional manhood by describing the horror of Hyacinth's disability in terms similar to his description of the seamy London underworld. Both the environment and the character evoke social ills. Through parallel presentations, Hyacinth's repellent physiognomy becomes emblematic of this underworld. As Mr. Vetch says of the seamier side of life, so the reader might say of the uncomfortable question of Hyacinth's impaired manhood: "[it is] very sad and hideous, and I am happy to say that I soon shall have done with it" (465). James early on underscores the young man's lack of interest in marriage. If Hyacinth—despite his very feminine-sounding, though classically male, name—were to desire heterosexual romance, then he could find social significance, though Hyacinth "would never marry at all—to that his mind was absolutely made up" (105). The vow against marriage is linked to his disgust with his own male lack, which in turn rests on his inheritance of poverty and ignominy.

Devoid of romantic interest, Hyacinth's association with women takes a unique turn: "If the soft society of women was to be enjoyed on other terms, he should cultivate it with a bold, free mind" (105). Hyacinth looks to the Princess and Millicent not as lovers but as friends, admiring the Princess for her ability to get what she wants, a trait Hyacinth lacks, and admiring Millicent for her strength of simplicity free "from the sophistries of civilisation" (583). His interest in women develops in a way different from romantic passion.

Women find him "theatrical," "exotic," and "wasted," a subject for curiosity and entertainment, they "always found him touching" (105). Madame Poupin tells Hyacinth that she still thinks of him as her "child" (550). The Princess Casamassima finds him curious but stunted. While Hyacinth wishes to be her confidant, the Princess dismisses his words as insignificant, telling Paul Muniment, "He's a dear fellow, with extraordinary qualities, but so deplorably conventional" (500). Much earlier in their relationship, when Hyacinth is staying at the Princess's estate, the Princess infantilizes him by saying, "I wished to leave you free to amuse yourself" (321).

Out of a sense of marginality, Hyacinth longs to be integral to the lives of his closest friends, though by playing the ambassador in bringing Paul Muniment and the Princess together, he loses the intimacy he enjoyed with both. He introduces the two, only to discover that the Princess and Muniment have already met, and he is dismayed by their not needing his introductions.

The Princess "had made it to Camberwell without his assistance". the "feeling that took possession of him was a kind of embarrassment" (406): From then on, he sees them coming and going together, suggesting to him a degree of intimacy he has never experienced: "Hadn't he wanted Paul to know her, months and months before, and now was he to entertain a vile feeling at the first manifestation of an intimacy" (535).

Hyacinth's sense of inadequacy ultimately leads to suicide. He detects the Princess's fondness for a certain aggression in Muniment that he lacks (425). Muniment dismisses Hyacinth as weak and insignificant, and is careless of Hyacinth's risking his life for revolution. Meanwhile the Princess reminds Hyacinth of how much he has been left out of things, "We have information. My dear fellow, you are so much out of it now that if I were to tell you, you wouldn't understand" (575). The effect of these failed personal relationships cannot be underestimated in contributing to his suicide, for Hyacinth thinks just prior to his death "that the Princess had done with him: 'a thought that remained the most vivid impression that Hyacinth had carried away from Madeira Crescent that night" (582). On the morning of his suicide, he thought he "had become vague, he was extinct" (582).

In a much later work, Henry James brings to center stage what in earlier works had been textually as well as socially marginalized. Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903) offers the most complete illustration of James's marginal male. Prior to this novel, marginal males were cast in marginal roles, appearing now and again at the service of more central characters with Rowland Mallet as confidant to Roderick Hudson, and Ralph Touchett illuminating Isabel Archer. And while Hyacinth Robinson is the central character of *The Princess Casamassima*, James distracts the reader by naming the novel after the Princess. In addition, these earlier examples precede the consciously dramatic style of James's later work, interrupting the marginal point of view with more conventional perspectives. Not until *The Ambassadors* does James assign an exclusive point of view, main character status, and title of the novel to the marginal male; in this novel, the "fine alienated sensibility would be the central sensibility in James" (Habegger, *Gender* 291).

Lambert Strether epitomizes James's marginal male. The death of his family erases his connection with marriage, bringing to bear the "multiple pressures of erasure that threaten people of marginal existence" (Yingling, *Hart Crane*, 36). In the company of Maria Gostrey, Strether is surprised at the thought that he is finally dining with a woman after the "grey middle desert" of the years between the death of his wife and that of his son, thinking that his dining with a woman before accompanying her to a play has "never before-no literally never" (*Ambassadors*, 43) involved him; he has missed out not only on what might have been, but also on what should have been in terms of social acceptability. His first marriage lacked the elements of romance that a man might expect to enjoy: "He had married, in the far-away years, so young as to have missed the time natural in Boston for taking girls to the Museum" (43).

The vagueness of Strether's desire, like the vagueness Hyacinth Robinson

discovers, frustrates easy analysis. He comes to Paris supposedly to perform a simple task, ultimately in the service of marriage. However, his goal of marrying Mrs. Newsome blends with other desires that enmesh and finally consume it. One is the desire for money: Strether's lack of financial success in a capitalistic world calls attention to his lack of aggression, and therefore of masculinity. His situation can be compared with that of Waymarsh, who has on his side the "fine silence" of a socially sanctioned separation from his Wife; he has done what any "man" would do—desert an unsuitable wife, in the bargain attaining enviable status: he "had held his tongue and had made a large income; and these were in especial the achievements as to which Strether envied him" (31).

Both Waymarsh and Strether have their secrets, but Strether's secret is, embarrassingly, a financial one. He "had indeed on his side too a subject for silence, which he fully appreciated; but it was a matter of a different sort, and the figure of the income he had arrived at had never been high enough to look anyone in the face" (31). The connection between the world of finances and sex is nothing new in James's fiction by the time of his writing *The Ambassadors*, but it assumes a unique subtlety here in terms of masculinity. Here, a lack of success in the business world reveals a character's lack as well in areas of romance.

This intertwining of finances and sexuality develops in a scene where Strether is dining with Maria Gostrey and notices a velvet ribbon in her hair. Instead of permitting himself a moment's appreciation of his companion's accessory, he catches himself, calling attention to his financial and sexual inadequacies and linking the two inextricably. Strether is troubled by his precarious place in the world of men, a world that demands devotion to work and money, not to trivialities like a woman's velvet band. His lack of success in the business world, he feels, denies him the right to romantic fulfillment.

Pushed to the margins by his financial failure, Strether is also suspect in another way, uncertain as he is about the focus of his sexual desire. One might assume that he wants to remarry, inasmuch as he is courting Mrs. Newsome. However, any romantic impulse on his part mingles inextricably with his need for money. As Waymarsh says, "You'll many—you personally—more money" (75). Strether's desires are complicated further by his strong attraction to Chad, the very person he intended to convert to the ways of Woollett. He adores "Chad's easiest urbanity" (141), finding Chad's social skills intimately tied to masculinity and power and therefore to personal freedom, admiring in this "irreducible young pagan" (99) what he himself does not possess—power, virility, and unquestioned masculinity.

Rather than censuring the young American, Strether admires Chad's extramarital romance. The young man seems to succeed in confirming his virility because of, not in spite of, his flaunting of social convention. Bilham explains to Strether that Chad operates from a sense of power rather than morality; "He wants to be free. He isn't used, you see," says little Bilham, "to being so good" (112). Far from rejecting him as immoral, Strether admires the almost animal-like Chad—on a near primal level. "It made him admire ...,

made him envy, the glossy male tiger, magnificently marked" (133). Strether's "stirred sense" now focuses on the male, skewing the reader's sense of Strether's maleness. Chad remains secure in his masculinity, while Strether envies what he does not have.

James adds to the theme of marginality Strether's failure as an artist. Strether thinks of the *Woollett Review*, which he "not at all magnificently" edits (50). He is "really rather disappointed" that Maria Gostrey hasn't heard of the publication. Only the thought of the journal's green cover inscribed with his name restores his self-confidence. These superficial details—over and name--symbolize his marginal significance in society; to Mrs. Newsome, he is momentarily useful, but always dispensable. She offers Strether the place of authorship only as part of a contract that includes the promise of financial well-being for Strether but with innumerable conditions attached—Mrs. Newsome controls all the strings.

Strether's role as ambassador parallels in several ways the roles played by other of James's sexually marginal males. Strether is suited to the role of ambassador because he is passive. His vulnerability stems in part from his gregariousness, a highly attractive aspect of his character. His verbosity contrasts with the silence of types like Waymarsh who remain in positions of power by withholding themselves, whereas Strether surrenders himself at every turn. Also, his painful shyness (37) prepares him to be used by others, so he resigns himself to being used by Mrs. Newsome in her efforts to uncover the activities of her son, Chad, in Europe.

Strether mistakenly believes that his ambassadorship for Mrs. Newsome will secure him a permanent niche in society's power structure, imagining therefore that his task is enormously significant: "If I'm squared where's my marriage? If I miss my errand I miss that; and if I miss that I miss everything--I'm nowhere" (75). His desire to serve and be significant makes him extend his ambassadorship to assist Madame de Vionnet and Chad. He hopes to serve others in order to achieve significance in their lives.

What Strether retains through much of the novel is the confidence that, if committed to his tasks, he will benefit both himself and those he serves. "No one could explain better when needful nor put more conscience into an account or a report" (92). He does not think of himself as exploited, for he expects the rewards to justify his efforts. His naiveté adds to his sympathetic portrayal. Other characters, meanwhile, are incredulous at his willingness to be so used. Chad says, "What I don't for the life of me make out is what you *gain* by it" (290). Maria Gostrey meanwhile questions his serving Madame de Vionnet and Chad, "If your idea's to stay [in Paris] for them you may be left in the lurch" (295).

His confidence in his own ability, and his confidence in others to reward him with their friendship, never wavers until the climax of the novel when he sees Madame de Vionnet and Chad in a moment of intimacy. Upon discovering them on the river, what horrifies him is not simply the affront to his Puritanism. Rather what arrests him is a consciousness of the very small role he plays in their lives: his concern at the novel's climax is for self-esteem

as he makes the shocking discovery that he sits in the darkness of insignificance while others enjoy the warmth of intimacy. Strether acknowledges that the fact of intimacy between two people leaves the third party "lonely and cold." "That was what, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was *like* that—and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like?" (313). Madame de Vionnet and Chad represent the heterosexual union to which the sexually marginalized male comes unprepared physically and emotionally.

Strether's marginality in playing the ambassador illustrates the dichotomy between the illusions held by the marginal figure and the incapability of society to finally accommodate that person. In Lambert Strether, James creates a sympathetic character who stands to inherit very little, the reason being that marriage is the clarion call of a heterosexual society. What places Strether even more in the margins is that, despite his original attachment to Mrs. Newsome, he questions the very basis of marriage. The specter of the affable, bumbling Jim Pocock haunts Strether. Pocock is a man who has married and so secured a place in Woollett but who has also been swallowed up by marriage to the point of losing his identity, "Pocock was normally and consentingly though not quite wittingly out of the question" (213). Strether calls him "Mrs. Jim," and views him as emasculated by the institution that supposedly assures the man power. Whether or not Jim suffers from this state—and there is ample verification of Strether's view—Strether feels that he might suffer the same plight.

Seen from a different perspective, Jim has fared better than Strether in terms of the masculine norm, managing to please society by associating with women on a romantic level. In contrast, Strether associates with women on a purely social basis; they are his best friends. In this way, Strether enjoys "an odd situation for a man" (213). Marriage would cost him the friendships he now enjoys with women: "It kept coming back to him in a whimsical way that he should find his marriage had cost him his place" (213). However, in his present state as a sexually inactive bachelor, he actually suffers far more at least in terms of his identity as a man.

The question of his filling the quotient of masculinity bothers Strether, and his friends unwittingly reinforce his sense of inadequacy. Madame de Vionnet, for example, asks if he isn't "a man in trouble" (177). Strether construes this query as an attack on his manhood: "He felt himself colour at the question, and then hated that—hated to pass for anything so idiotic as woundable" (177). His response suggests that his male identity is the aspect of his personality most easily wounded.

Lambert Strether and the other aforementioned characters hold at best a precarious, and by some views reprehensible, position in society. That they should be sympathetically drawn suggests that they share a commonality with their creator. Indeed Henry James's life can in many aspects be seen as a study in marginality, one that would offer rich resources on which the author might draw for the unique male characters in his fiction. It takes little imagination to view James's life as correlative to the existence of his marginal

male characters. Biography may help to pinpoint more precisely where this marginal type stands in relation to society.

A key issue in both Henry James's life and the lives of his fictional characters is that of *choice*. How much choice did James have in the life he led? There is a need to reexamine James's life in order to trace the pattern of marginality that contradicts the notion that James freely chose his "life of the imagination." His "choice" of renunciation may in fact rest on a quality of marginality that shaped his life while informing his work with the subtle type of the timid male whose timidity rests not so much on choices made as on choices made for him by a society oriented toward a single norm of sexuality and masculinity.

The catalog of James's marginal status is a lengthy one, at every step reinforcing a general condition of exclusion from the norm. Like the marginal males in his fiction, James exhibited a reluctance to marry, a fact troubling to a society that would have him conclude his bachelorhood. One cause for gossip was James's friendship with Emilie Grigsby, a wealthy Kentuckian who saw James as her ticket into the British literati. Her method of securing ties with James was to spread the false notion that he wished to marry her. In a letter rushed off to his brother William, Henry shows his determination to rout any suspicion about an impending marriage, signing the letter, "Your hopelessly celibate even though sexegenarian Henry" (Seymour, *A Ring of Conspirators* 102). James felt compelled to allay society's suspicions on the subject of his marriage.

On occasion James envied the security of married life. In a letter to William and his Wife, Alice, he wrote, "How large your life swings compared to mine, and how much—beside the lone bachelor's—it takes in!" (*Letters*, 45). It is not so much the actuality of his bachelorhood that might well concern the James scholar, but rather James's imaginative concept of it. He acknowledged his freedom but felt himself on the margins of life because of an essential loneliness. His bachelorhood warded off society, but at a price. In a revealing letter to Morton Fullerton, James answered his friend's question about what "port" James sailed from. He wrote, "The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the *essential loneliness of my life*-and it seems to be the port also, in sooth to which my course again finally directs itself! This loneliness, (since I mention it!)-what is it still but the deepest thing about one? Deeper about *me*, at any rate, than anything else" (*Letters*, 4:170). These words convey, in a moment of truthful surrender, his life course as he perceived it: not one of centrality, but one of marginality. His bachelor state contributed to the sense that other people were participating in social privileges that were denied him; marriage represented to him the epicenter of society, a "type of belonging" that was "incompatible with his needs" (Kaplan, *Henry James*, 34). To marry meant to submit to what society held up as life, something James refused to do.

Another aspect of James's marginality is his relationship with his older brother William. William might well be viewed in light of the Lacanian concept of the "other" (Rowe, *Theoretical Dimensions*, 104), a source of endless

concept for Henry. Oddly enough, the younger brother cherished this problematic relationship to the point of obsession. In his essay "Henry James: Interpreting an Obsessive Memory," Richard Hall conjectures that Henry James was fixated on his brother. Leon Edel finds resonance in Hall's remarks: "Once we agree[with Hall]on Henry's love fixation on William, that explains a lot of things" (Hall, "Interpreting," 85). Edel's agreement with Hall raises the question of why Edel dealt with the possibility of Henry's fixation so little in his biography' Edel wrote to Hall, "If I were writing these volumes today I would indeed make much more of this" (Hall, "Interpreting," 84). Edel's bypassing of this possibility in his biography mirrors the response of many of James's readers who find little significance in details that heighten the sense of James as marginal, particularly sexually marginal. Nonetheless, reports of James's life by his friends Edmund Gosse and Hugh Walpole take the issue of marginality beyond conjecture.

Gosse and Walpole reveal James in a rare moment of candor concerning his private life. In a telling comment about James, Gosse recorded in his *Aspects and Impressions* (1922), "There had hung over him a sort of canopy, a mixture of reserve and deprecation, faintly darkening the fullness of communion with his character; there had always been something indefinably nonconductive between him and those in whom he had most confidence." Gosse then relates one particular occasion, at twilight on a summer evening, when he and James were walking in the gardens at Rye. According to Gosse's account, James suddenly began talking in a "profuse and enigmatic language," recounting a strange event from his past. Gosse writes,

James spoke of standing on the pavement of a city, in the dusk, and of gazing upwards across the street, watching, watching for the lighting of a lamp on the third storey. And the lamp blazed out, and through bursting tears he strained to see what was behind it, the unapproachable face. And for hours he stood there, wet with the rain, brushed by the phantom figures of the scene, and never from behind the lamp was for one moment visible the face (Gosse, *Aspects and Impressions*, 42-43).

Gosse writes that after the story both he and James stood in absolute silence, unable to make conversation, after which James suddenly disappeared into the house for an hour.

This commentary provides several parallels between James and those male characters in his fiction who find themselves sexually marginalized. Most significantly, the reader is confronted here by a desired object, which Hall assumes is Henry's brother William. Hall goes a long way in proving this assumption, recalling that this event in James's "obsessive memory" must have occurred while he was traveling with his brother in Europe.

Perhaps more significant than the possibility of Henry's infatuation with William is the unattainability of the desired object, whatever that object

might have been. James could not see the face at the window, and were the face to appear, desire would have been sustained because of the physical space separating subject and object. Hall labels this scenario "window straining," which he finds applicable to numerous situations in James's fiction where the act of "sexual exclusion" occurs (Hall, "Interpreting," 94). Hall's concept of exclusion could well be applied to the marginal male who is excluded from social acceptance because his sexual wishes are the taboos of the status quo.

Did such a "window straining" scene actually occur? Hugh Walpole, in *The Horizon*, corroborates Gosse's account "Sexually also he [James] had suffered some frustration. What that frustration was I never knew, but I remember him telling me how he had once in his youth in a foreign town watched a whole night in pouring rain for the appearance of a figure at the window. That was the end. . ' he said, and broke off" (quoted in Hall, "Interpreting," 88). Again, the writings that Hall brings to light are intriguing, not because they verify James's sexual activity (if any existed), but because they verify a psychological state that persists in his fiction—that of the unattainability of the desired object. As for the "window episode," whether or not the incident occurred, James's "obsessive memory" of it creates the scenario for what happens to James's fictional characters who strain after objects that elude them. As James said of Lambert Strether in his introduction to *The Ambassadors*, Strether's "very groping would figure among his most interesting motions" (*Ambassadors*, 9).

Another aspect of James's marginality was his apparent passivity. His "obscure hurt" exemplifies his sense of impairment, whether physical or psychological. This self-definition encouraged passivity, as opposed to the more active and stereotypically masculine role that his brother William assumed. Henry played a passive role in the Civil War; his father refused him active participation (Seymour, 268). More than one biographer has argued that James was taught from an early age to be submissive, while his older brother favored an active role (Seymour, 70). William set out on personal voyages, soon to be followed by Henry, who found himself outdone, whether in grade school or at the university (Edel, *Henry James*, 1:61-62). Years later Henry described their situation as one where "what I probably most did, all the while, was but to pick up, and to the effect not a bit of starving but quite of filling myself, the crumbs of his [William's] feast and the echoes of his life" (*Notes of a Son and Brother*, 12). On one of his visits to London, William observed his younger brother's essential "powerlessness" in all respects save in his art (Seymour, 127). By proclaiming his brother's passivity, William reinforced the role he demanded of Henry. In truth, Henry's passivity surfaced largely when he was in William's company, as if Henry sought to confirm William's analysis of him as powerless (Seymour, 127). While William and Henry related to one another "intellectually as adults, emotionally they were still back in Fourteenth Street, in the 1850s" (Edel, 5:322).

The uncertainty that James felt about his ability to assert himself against the world spilled over into other aspects of his life. His art was threatened by William's persistent reminder that Henry was the younger, and therefore

more submissive, sibling. William frequently chastised Henry for his circuitous method of writing. The elder brother had long encouraged his younger brother to go into something more practical than art, and now that Henry was involved in fiction, the least he could do would be to forthrightly reveal his themes and characters instead of skirting the issues.

William's biting criticism accompanied even the later novels. Henry had sent his brother a copy of *The Golden Bowl*, hoping for some encouragement, and instead received word that the book had gone against all of William's notions of how a book should be written. William wrote, "Why don't you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigour and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, or psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness of style" (quoted in Edel, 5:300). William oddly enough demanded more assertion from Henry in his fiction, whereas in life William permitted no such assertive behavior from him.

Negative responses to Henry's artistic endeavors did not end with William. A less-than-affirmative response from many of his friends to such books as *The American Scene* would only reinforce William's condemnation of Henry's work. The public never responded adequately to Henry's need for approval either. He would always feel inferior from a lack of the same popular acclaim so readily given to several of his contemporaries, including Edith Wharton and H. G. Wells.

Thus while critics would rave about his work, his popular significance was slight. James worked hard at, and was particularly satisfied with, *The Ambassadors*. He no doubt anticipated big sales but was to see small figures in contrast to those garnered by his good friend H. G. Wells, to whom he wrote, "My book has been out upwards of a month, and, not emulating your 4,000, has sold, I believe, to the extent of 4 copies. In America it is doing better promises to reach 400" (quoted in Seymour, 92). Wells churned out books rapidly, while James saw only minor profits after comparatively long labors. This contrast with another's success would repeat itself with Edith Wharton, who enjoyed astounding sales. *The House of Mirth* earned its author some \$20,000 in 1905, and in 1906 became the best-selling novel of any American work of fiction, selling more than 100,000 copies (Seymour, 237). In a humorous anecdote now famous among James scholars, Henry James quipped that while Edith Wharton had purchased a new Packard automobile with the proceeds from her popular success *The Valley of Decision*, he had with his proceeds from *The Wings of the Dove* "purchased a small go-cart, or hand-barrow, on which my guest's luggage is wheeled from the station to my house." He continued, "It needs a coat of paint. With the proceeds of my next novel I shall have it painted" (quoted in Seymour, 237).

James was never better than in these moments of humor at masking his private lament that artistic success failed to pay adequate dividends. His reward was one which satisfied his ideal, but left him wanting in the ways society-at large judged success. His dilemma sometimes surfaced in the baldest fashion, revealing his need for significance in all the ways anticipated by a "successful"

artist. He is reported to have said to one successful writer of his time, "You are popular! Your admirable work is appreciated by a wide circle of readers; it has achieved popularity. Mine-never goes into a second edition. I should so much have loved to be popular" (quoted in Seymour, 236).

Two incidents highlighted his need for public acclaim, acclaim that would have assuaged his feelings of marginality. An early devastation occurred with the failure of his stage play *Guy Domville*. On the unfortunate night of the play's performance, James chose not to attend his own play, but went instead to a production of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. While the highly popular Oscar Wilde increased in popularity, James's play was booed out of the theater. When the last line went out, "I'm the *last*, my lord, of the Domvilles!" someone in the audience jeered, "It's a bloody good thing y'are" (quoted in Edel, 4:78). Where he had sought to master the situation, the situation had instead mastered him—a reminder of his powerlessness to assert himself in society. The failure sent him into one of the gloomiest periods on record, what he called "The most horrible hours of my life" (quoted in Edel, 4:84). James said after enduring his dark night of the soul, "It has been a great relief that one of the most detestable incidents of my life has closed" (quoted in Edel, 4:88).

In fact, such failure became familiar to James and would foreshadow the failure surrounding the publication of the New York edition of his reprinted novels (1907-1910), after which Edith Wharton recalled how changed James was from the man "so completely the master of his wonderful emotional instrument," She writes, "I could hardly believe it was the same James who cried out to me his fear, his despair, his craving for the cessation of consciousness, & all his unspeakable loneliness & need of comfort, & inability to be comforted" (Seymour, 123). While James had anticipated the New York edition to be the crowning achievement of his later years, the editions sold at an astonishingly low rate. His first royalty would total only \$211 (*Letters*, 4:498). His response was emotional breakdown. At his breakdown, he collected his private papers, including forty years of letters, manuscripts, and notebooks, heaped them up, and burned them (Edel, 5:437). Concerning the breakdown, James's nephew Harry wrote,

There was nothing for me to do but to sit by his side and hold his hand while he panted and sobbed for two hours until the Doctor arrived, and stammered in despair so eloquently and pathetically that as I write of it, the tea~ flow down my cheeks again. He talked about Aunt Alice and his own end and I knew him to be facing not only the frustration of all hopes and ambitions, but the vision looming close and threatening to his weary eyes, of a lingering illness such as hers. In sight of all that, he wanted to die. ... He didn't have a good night and the next day the same thing began again with a fear of being alone. (quoted in Edel, 5:440)

Still other factors affected his precarious stance in society. After the failure of his play, Henry wrote to William, "Oscar Wilde's farce which followed *Guy Domville* is, I believe, a great success—and with his two roaring successes running now at once he must be raking in the profits" (quoted in Edel, 4:88).

Such a commentary allows a connection to be made between his felt lack of social significance as an artist and his felt failure to perform in a "manly" fashion in another arena-the world of business. He was to say to Howells, who had just aided him in the book trade in America, that he felt, in his ineptitude in business matters, "like an old maid against the wall and on her lonely bench" (quoted in Edel, 4:199). In this phrase, James metaphorically linked a lack of business sense with a sexual lack, cognizant as he was of the shame of a man who lacked skill with finances.

While James always had money, there was never quite enough in comparison with his peers. From early on James knew the pressure of the "silver cord" that bound him first to his parents for aid, and then to his older brother. One example of that financial dependency came when James decided to purchase Lamb House. Though he owned capital, he had very little money on hand to make the purchase. He wrote to his brother William (who handled all his financial affairs) intending to request money, but feeling also the need to justify his expenses. He wrote, "Don't be alarmed. ... I don't mean that I've received a proposal of marriage" (quoted in Edel, 4:318). The realm of Finances, so crucial in James's time and place, mingled with the other elements of self-doubt that threatened his sense of self. William condemned his brother's decision as "extravagant." Henry went ahead and purchased the house anyway, in one of his few assertive acts against William. His desperation over assuming control of his own life had reached a crisis when he wrote,

My whole being cries out loud for something I can call my own-and when I look round me at the splendour of so many of the 'literary' fry, ... and I feel that I may strike the world as still, at 56, with my long labour and my genius, reckless, presumptuous and unwarranted in curling up (for my more assured peaceful production) in a poor little \$10,000 shelter-once and for all and for all time-then I do feel the bitterness of humiliation, the iron enters into my soul, and (I blush to confess it,) I *weep!* But enough, enough, enough! (quoted in Edel, 319-320)

His financial woes continued to haunt him. Edith Wharton served as one constant reminder of the wealth of America that had not been his (*Letters*, 4:xxi), her vast wealth at The Mount from across the Atlantic providing stark contrast to James's Lamb House, where he described his situation as beggarly (*Letters*, 4:352). Indeed his house might appear grand to modern day viewers, but the important issue is one of perceived difference: how James interpreted his financial situation in relation to the wealth of his peers. Money was by no means a taboo subject to James; he would often joke about his situation, to the point that Edith Wharton decided to raise a substantial gift in his behalf. When his nephew Harry informed him of Wharton's scheme, James was outraged: "A more reckless and indiscreet undertaking, with no ghost of a preliminary leave asked, no hint of a sounding taken, I cannot possibly conceive-and am still rubbing my eyes for incredulity" (quoted in Edel, 5:484). The thought of being pitied horrified him. His extreme response

his anger and sense of insult—suggests that money pointed to deeper insecurities. He could not abide public notice of his financial need, which he felt might lead to doubts about his "performance" in other areas. James never apologized for his denouncement of Wharton's efforts on his behalf.

Another issue that touches on the lives of both the author and his marginal male characters is their frequent participation in ambassadorial roles, acting in behalf of others, and in that sense being essentially passive as they act without immediate self-aggrandizement. James was in demand as a confidant and character witness in the affairs of his heterosexually active friends. Violet Hunt looked to James as an "ambassador" in her relationship with Ford Madox Hueffer, finding in James the perfect gentleman to represent Hueffer and herself in their divorce trials. James had corresponded with Hunt for some time and had already invited her to stay at Lamb House when news of the pending divorce proceedings reached him. At this point, Hunt solicited James as an ally for her cause. He flatly refused, realizing the possible effects of his implication, prizing as he did his good name. What stands out in this scenario is that he would indeed have been the perfect ally, unmarried and unimplicated in any romantic relationship of his own, available for the whims of a heterosexually linked couple.

Edith Wharton likewise looked to James as an ambassador in her relationship with Morton Fullerton, both to bring them together and to assist them in divorces from earlier marriages. As in the situation with Hunt, James represented to Wharton a perfect ally and confidant but, as was not the case with Violet Hunt, James felt a genuine fondness for Wharton. He depended upon her for professional counsel, and as a source of leisure par excellence at her Massachusetts estate, The Mount.

As for Morton Fullerton, the young man held an attraction both physical and intellectual for the author. James met Fullerton in the 1880s, and ever after found him to be appealing company, enough so to confess to him his essential loneliness along with other dissatisfactions of his life. Consequently, James found no shame in introducing Fullerton and Wharton to each other, never displaying a hint of suspicion that the two might become lovers. After all, Wharton was married and Fullerton had not advertised his frequent and incessant romances. It was with great surprise that James found himself then operating as a go-between, now finding himself important mostly as a listening ear. James didn't discover the fact of their intimacy until Wharton confided in him out of a need for consolation, whereupon he advised her in a now famous statement, not unlike the unattached Strether to the younger Bilham, to "Sit tight yourself and go *through the movements of life*, live it all through every inch of it ... waitingly" (quoted in Edel, 5:413).

James found himself suddenly embroiled in a torrid affair complicated by previous entanglements on both sides. As difficult as the situation was, more painful to him was the fact that neither party had informed him of the particulars of their relationship earlier, which made him feel left out. James couldn't help wishing in particular that Fullerton had confided in him more, "I think of the whole long mistaken perversity of your averted *reality* so to

speak, as a miserable *personal* waste, that of something—ah, so tender!—in *me* that was only quite yearningly ready for you, and something all possible, and all deeply and admirably appealing in yourself, of which I never got the benefit" (quoted in Edel, 5:416).

Fullerton confided in James only to ask advice about how to escape his previous relationship. Wharton too begged from James some advice on how to extricate herself from an intolerable marriage. James felt jealousy as much as anything else at having been left out for so long (Seymour, 246), nonetheless, he gave advice and also provided the cover for financial aid to Fullerton in the form of a commission from Macmillan Publishing for Fullerton to write a book. James, it would seem, had a hand in every pie, until he finally conceded that the duties had indeed been greater than the rewards. Such a concession comes more or less in his saying to Wharton that it was she who had "saved" Fullerton in the end, and not he. In this statement, James admits society's valuing of lover over friend.

Such marginality shows James at the mercy of circumstance. While he has been hailed as the writer of fiction who depicts characters supremely equipped to make choices with their wealth and education, his own life shows a striking susceptibility to psychological, physical, and social forces. It is hardly accidental, then, that James's fiction includes many characters who share this precarious relationship to the social norm. The implication of this view is that James and his work detail an enormous interest in the limitations of society and the need for psychological space for such misfit individuals. A review of the catalog of James's marginal situations suggests that his fiction served as an imaginative stimulus for the creation of marginal male characters in his fiction; "his otherness would become a crucial element in his art" (Kaplan, 36). By writing fiction about these nonheroes, James would raise the Question, How can such marginal figures find self-expression, comfort, and space in a closed society] The tracing of marginality answers these questions while exposing James's fictional world as startlingly unconventional.

You may also like. Henry James Hardback Antiquarian & Collectable Books. Henry James Hardback Fiction Books. Henry James Paperback Books. Henry James Hardback Children's & Young Adults' Books. Henry James Hardback Non-Fiction Books. Classics Hardback Books Henry James. Additional site navigation. Ellie Rose: Wait. You have a tank?! [Henry opens the garage]. Ellie Rose: You said you stole this from the Toppats? That name sounds familiar. I think I heard of them when I was getting locked up at the wall Criminal organization, right? And you crossed them, huh? We gotta put this bad boy to use! What do you say we hit 'em again? I don't know about you, but I'm runnin' pretty low on cash Great! I'll get in touch with my contacts and find out where they're at. [Henry driving the Tank]. Henry James was born on 15 April 1843 and is regarded as one of the great literary figures of 19th Century writing. In this series of short stories he brings the class and elegance of Victorian and Edwardian literature to each carefully chosen mixture of well known favourites and forgotten gems. Born in New York, he moved between there and Europe, being tutored in Geneva, London, Paris, Bologna, and Bonn. At the age of 19 he briefly attended Harvard Law School, but preferred reading literature to studying law and settled the next year in England. As well as an outstanding author he was also a "Nothing but the impression. I took that here" he tapped his heart. "I've never lost it." "Then your manuscript?" "The scene had a greatness that made it a different affair from my own scant home, and there immediately appeared at the door, with a little girl in her hand, a civil person who dropped me as decent a curtsy as if I had been the mistress or a distinguished visitor. I had received in Harley Street a narrower notion of the place, and that, as I recalled it, made me think the proprietor still more of a gentleman, suggested that what I was to enjoy might be something beyond his promise.